

## THE TRANSLATOR: BEN AGUILAR AND THE HUNTSVILLE PRISON SEIGE

Anthony Lane, Outreach and Teen Service Coordinator

The bulk of my job as the Outreach and Teen Service Coordinator can be summed up as getting to know our patrons, so I can better assist the community. After all, you can't know how to help someone find the resources they need if you don't know the community you're working in. There are so many patrons who come into the library multiple times each week. One of those patrons has spent more than two decades quietly blending in amongst the other faces in the library—sitting in some corner reading a book or the newspaper. Until recently, I didn't even know his name. Now I do, and he has an amazing story to tell.

Ben ate lunch at the Huntsville Unit Officer's Dining Hall almost every day but on July 24, 1974, he noticed something out of the ordinary. Three inmates were seated on the steps in front of the prison chapel. Less than an hour later, he received a phone call that would have a profound impact on the rest of his life. The same three men would take more than a dozen hostages and begin an eleven-day prison siege.

Ben was working in the Classification Department at the administrative offices across the street from the Huntsville Unit. He had been working for TDC for almost eleven years. Shortly after



1 pm, his phone rang. It was Dorothy Coleman, the secretary for William "Jim" Estelle. "Ben, this is Dorothy," she said. "Mr. Estelle wants you to go to Warden Husband's office and wait." Estelle was in Austin and was now racing back to lead hostage negotiations. Ben would be his translator.

Now 85 years old, Ben's voice is raspy and softer than it once was. He sounds different than

he does on the recorded audio of the incident. After nearly five decades reflecting on the incident, he can speak about it with remarkable candor. He doesn't remember everything as well as he once did, but he can still recall significant details. His demeanor is calm as he recounts the story. When asked how often he has thought about the incident, he replied, "Quite often. Almost every day."



tremendous. There were sixteen hostages total. Ten were civilians, one a prison chaplain, a TDC guard, and four inmates:

Yvonne "Von" Beseda, 46, teacher  
 Anthony "Jack" Branch, 36, teacher  
 L.G. Bertha "Bert" Davis, 54, librarian  
 Ann Fleming, 50, librarian  
 Bobby Heard, 26, guard  
 Aline House, 61, Director of Library Services  
 Glennon Johnson, 51, educational consultant  
 Father Joseph O'Brien, 46, chaplain  
 Novella Pollard, 47, teacher  
 Ronald Robinson, 35, teacher  
 Julia "Judy" Standley, 43, librarian  
 Linda Woodman, 44, librarian  
 Henry Escamilla, 40, inmate  
 Martin Quiroz, 26, inmate  
 Steven Ray Robertson, 25, inmate  
 Florencio Vera, 29, inmate

Outside of Huntsville, very few people have heard of the Huntsville Prison Siege. Among those who do live in Huntsville, most do not know about the incident unless they have been here for several years or have worked for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The story is larger than life, but much of it has faded from our memory. Though the incident was perpetrated by three men, one name looms larger than the rest—Frederico "Fred" Carrasco.

Carrasco oversaw a heroin-running operation between San Antonio and Guadalajara, Mexico in the 1960s and 70s. He had been in and out of prison since 1958, when he shot a man outside of a San Antonio dance hall and stole his car.[1] In the fourteen years preceding his final arrest, Carrasco is estimated to have murdered more than forty people, including several of his own lieutenants. On July 21st, 1973, he was finally captured by San Antonio police. His wife, Rosa, was with him at the time, as she had

been on numerous other encounters with the law in both Texas and Mexico. He drew a pistol during the encounter but never fired a shot. When he attempted to flee, he was shot three times.[2][3] Carrasco was ultimately convicted of assault and attempted murder of a police officer. He pleaded guilty in exchange for the dismissal of charges against his wife.[1] His final stint in prison was at the Huntsville State Penitentiary, commonly referred to as the Walls Unit.

The Huntsville Prison Siege began on July 24, 1974, only a few months after Carrasco arrived. Fred and two accomplices—Rudy Dominguez and Ignacio Cuevas—used pistols that had been smuggled into the unit to take hostages in the prison library. For eleven days, they threatened the lives of the hostages and demanded to be released. During this time, Ben translated and negotiated with Carrasco. The weight on his shoulders was

All the hostage-takers had violent histories, and Carrasco had shown an extreme lack of regard for human life. The hostages were in danger, and Ben was responsible for keeping Carrasco and his accomplices as calm as possible. The first day was the most intense. Carrasco made impossible demands. He wanted bullet-proof vests, helmets, M-16 rifles, 100 rounds of ammunition for each man, and new clothing.[4] Bobby Heard was the sole prison guard held hostage in the library. Carrasco said if his demands were not met, he would begin killing hostages and claimed, "the man in the gray will be No. 1." He also wanted good hamburgers, which were purchased down the street from Mr. Hamburger.

Throughout most of the first day, Ben, Warden Hal Husbands, and Director Jim Estelle were alone. Carrasco's attorney, Ruben Montemayor, came from San Antonio. By the evening, Texas Rangers and the FBI arrived and assisted with negotiations, but Ben was still the man responsible for





talking directly to Carrasco and ensuring that no one would be harmed. Throughout the process, Ben was coached by the FBI, but his task was difficult. He had no training in negotiation. He was unequipped for the situation, except for his remarkable ability to remain calm. In the moments when Carrasco became aggressive or angry, or even desperate, Ben's tone never changed. The first night, he got just a few minutes of sleep sitting in a chair in the corner of Hal Husband's office.

By the second day, Carrasco became more comfortable with him. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"Huntsville," Ben replied, which was not entirely true, but he did not want Carrasco to know where he lived. Ben hoped Carrasco would begin to open up, but it never happened. It was wishful thinking, and from that time forward, Ben began to feel more cynical about what the outcome would be. Things were about to get worse. Despite having no

authority to make decisions, Ben said, "I felt like [the hostages] lives were in my hands." As negotiations bogged down on the third day, Carrasco became increasingly irritable. As he cursed over the phone and threatened hostages, Ben began to feel the real weight of negotiations. The lives of everyone still in the library were in his hands. On July 29, Carrasco heard on the radio that a warrant had been issued for his wife. He became incensed and ramped up his threat to kill the hostages. Montemayor and Estelle assured Carrasco that Rose would not be arrested as long as none of the hostages were harmed. In a fit of rage, Carrasco put the scared hostages on the phone to negotiate on his behalf. Ben listened as Bobby Heard cried and begged Estelle to do something to save the lives of the hostages.

"These are desperate men," he said. "I don't want to die." In desperation, Heard asked Estelle if he could "put a helicopter in the yard" in order to fly Carrasco to freedom.[1] Estelle remained calm yet unrelenting. "Mr. Carrasco already knows what he can do to end this situation," he said. Ben just listened. The hostages were terrified. Carrasco seemed to have no regard for the lives of the hostages other than their value as a negotiating tool. It was at this time that Ben began to feel like violence was the only possible outcome.

Ben knew Fred Carrasco was never going to be released. The Texas Department of Corrections, now TDCJ, has long had a non-negotiation policy. Regardless of the number of hostages or the intent of the offender, a hostage-taker will never be allowed to exit a penitentiary. Today, due primarily to the Carrasco incident, there are signs posted at the exit of every prison in the state of Texas that read, "No hostages beyond this point." If Carrasco was not able to escape, then it was highly likely that his desperation would eventually turn to violence. By this point, Ben had mostly been sidelined. Montemayor handled most of the direct contact with Carrasco. But Ben could not leave. For eleven days, he sat in the office—a spectator of the longest prison siege in US history (unsurpassed until the Arizona State Penitentiary Hostage Standoff in Buckeye, Arizona in 2004). His cynicism was prophetic.

On August 3rd, the Texas Marshals and the Governor of Texas relented and provided an armored car for Carrasco. The goal was not to help him escape. Rather, they wanted to draw him out of the library. The escape attempt on the final day has been captured in great detail by journalists, writers, and the hostages. There is no reason to rehash it here. The shootout ultimately claimed the lives of two hostages, Von Beseda and Julia Judy Standley, as well as Rudy Dominguez and Fred Carrasco. Ignacio Cuevas survived. He received a death sentence for the incident and was executed in 1991.

Ben spent the next few days writing reports—carrying the weight of the dead on his shoulders. Forty-nine years later, Ben said, “I wonder if there was something we could have done differently—something that might have avoided the killing.” After nearly five decades, however, he still believes that every man in the room did the very best he could to save the lives of the hostages. If there was a mistake, Ben hasn’t been able to determine what it was.

He retired from TDC in October of 1996. His wife died soon after. He then spent a few years as a bailiff and worked as a translator for the county court. The loneliness of being a widower is what introduced him to the library. Ben loved to read. For twenty-five years, Ben has shown up every few days, dressed up for the library, and spent a few hours reading the newspapers.



*Two of the most important books about the Huntsville Prison Siege are available in the Johnnie Jo Sowell Dickenson Genealogy Room at the Huntsville Public Library. They are The Carrasco Tragedy: Eleven Days of Terror in the Huntsville Prison by Aline House and Eleven Days in Hell by William T. Harper. Aline Harper was the Director of Library Services at the Huntsville Unit and one of the hostages during the siege.*

[1] John Moore and Reed Holland, “The Laredo-San Antonio Wars,” Texas Monthly, August 1973, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/true-crime/the-laredo-san-antonio-heroin-wars/>

[2] Gregory Curtis, “The Strange Power of Fred Carrasco,” Texas Monthly, October 1974, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/true-crime/the-strange-power-of-fred-carrasco/>

[3] Some reports claim Carrasco was shot four times.

[4] “Carrasco’s Past: Drugs and Prison,” The New York Times, August 4, 1974, <https://www.nytimes.com/1974/08/04/archives/carrascos-past-drugs-and-prison-first-arrest-came-at-age-15-later.html>

[5] Aline House, The Carrasco Tragedy: Eleven Days of Terror in the Huntsville Prison, (Waco, Texas: Texian Press, 1975), 4.

[6] House, The Carrasco Tragedy, 3.

[7] Texas Department of Criminal Justice Carrasco Audio Tapes, Tape 15, Side B, July 29, 1974, [https://tsl.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO\\_2cde6a2e-82f4-4ddc-82f7-2a8c73a1344b/](https://tsl.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_2cde6a2e-82f4-4ddc-82f7-2a8c73a1344b/)



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AGES 18+



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Linda Huff at 936-291-5910



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FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CALL  
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LINDA HUFF  
AT 936-291-5910



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# NEW HOURS

EFFECTIVE AUGUST 15, 2023

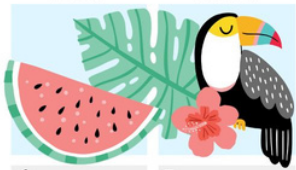
MONDAY - FRIDAY  
10 AM - 7 PM

SATURDAY  
10 AM - 2 PM



**AUGUST 2023**



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
		1 LIBRARY CLOSURES AT 5:00 PM For City Council Meeting	2 10:30 AM - 11:30 AM Fiber Arts	3 2:30 PM - 3:30 PM Summer reading Celebration	4 10:00 AM - 5:30 PM Summer Lock-In	5 10:00 AM - 3:15 PM Summer Lock-In
6	7	8	9 10:30 AM - 11:30 AM Fiber Arts	10 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM Beginner Microsoft Excel Classes	11	12 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM Piney Woods Writers Group
13	14	15 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM Medicare LIBRARY CLOSURES AT 5:00 PM For City Council Meeting	16 10:30 AM - 11:30 AM Fiber Arts	17 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM Beginner Microsoft Excel Classes 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM Piney Woods Page Turners Book Club	18	19
20	21 10:30 AM - 12:00 PM Master Gardeners	22	23 10:30 AM - 11:30 AM Fiber Arts	24 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM Beginner Microsoft Excel Classes	25	26 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM Piney Woods Writers Group
27	28	29	30 10:30 AM - 11:30 AM Fiber Arts	31 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM Beginner Microsoft Excel Classes		

## Huntsville Public Library-Adult Programs

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**AUGUST 2023**



SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
		1 LIBRARY CLOSURES AT 5:00 PM For City Council Meeting	2 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	3 2:30 PM Summer reading Celebration	4 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	5
6	7 10:45 AM Ages 2 and under MOTHER GOOSE LAPSIT	8	9 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	10	11 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	12
13	14 10:45 AM Ages 2 and under MOTHER GOOSE LAPSIT	15 LIBRARY CLOSURES AT 5:00 PM For City Council Meeting	16 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	17	18 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	19
20	21 10:45 AM Ages 2 and under MOTHER GOOSE LAPSIT	22	23 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	24	25 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime 1:30 PM Ages 5-12 KIDS' CLUB	26 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime
27	28 10:45 AM Ages 2 and under MOTHER GOOSE LAPSIT	29	30 10:45 AM Age 6 and under Storytime	31		

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